

Followers of the Way

Laodicea - Those whom I love I rebuke

Lynda Rose, 12-11-23

Revelation 3: 14-22, 14: 1-21

After the faithful and inspiring example of Philadelphia, we come now to the last of the 7 churches, Laodicea. And it's definitely not a case of saving the best till last. In fact, for Laodicea there is only rebuke, and an urgent call to repentance, if they're to escape judgment.

So what do we know about Laodicea, and what do we know about the church there? Well, for a start, it was a very rich, ancient city on the River Lyksos in Asia Minor, in what's now Turkey, situated about 6 miles from the modern-day city of Denizli. Originally, it was called Diospolis, 'city of Zeus', but around 260 BC Antiochus II Theos, king of the Seleucid Empire, took over and renamed the city Laodicea, in honour of his wife Laodice. Apart from that, we know that it was on a major trade route – extremely prosperous – and a centre for the manufacture of textiles, clothing, and banking. It was also famous in the ancient world for the manufacture of eye ointment, produced from nearby springs – which is reflected in v.18 of the letter. 'I counsel you to buy ... salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see'. So, overall, the citizens of Laodicea were wealthy and they had a pretty good life.

We also know that from around 200 BC, after Antiochus the Great had transported 2,000 Jewish families from Babylonia to Phrygia, Laodicea had a large Jewish community, which annually sent large amounts of gold to Jerusalem for the temple. However, how a Christian community arrived in the city exactly, we don't know, but in his letter to the Colossians, Paul mentions Laodicea as a community causing some concern, and it would seem that, along with the churches at Colossae and Hierapolis, the Laodiceans might have been evangelized by Epaphras. Colossians 1:7, Paul writes, 'You learned about the Good News from Epaphras, our beloved co-worker. He is Christ's faithful servant, and he is helping us on your behalf.'

So, taken all together and given where they were, it seems likely that the Laodicean church shared in the wealth of the city, and also had things pretty easy. Revelation 3:17, Christ says to them, 'You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.'" This is a prosperous church. But to Jesus, they appear very different. In the Lord's assessment, they're 'wretched, pitiful, blind, poor, and naked.'

It's clear then that the Laodiceans hadn't just become complacent, but that they had succumbed to the idolatry of wealth. But let's start at the beginning of the letter. Jesus describes Himself as 'the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation'. Now this is very important. Amen means the last and final word or agreement, by calling Himself the Amen, Jesus is saying that His is the last and final word, that cannot be gainsaid, because He's the faithful and true witness, who rules

God's creation. This is really serious stuff. And Jesus' first charge is that the Laodiceans have become lukewarm. They're neither hot nor cold, He says, which is infinitely worse than if they were intentionally 'bad', *because they just don't care*. And it's because they're so indifferent, the Lord goes on, that He's going to spit them out. Like salt that has lost its taste, they've become useless. They're fit for nothing.

And perhaps the most tragic thing of all, is that the Laodiceans don't realise this. In fact, they clearly think they're pretty ace! Maybe they even look down on other, 'poorer' believers.

What's that saying, I wonder, to the Church in our own country today? What's it saying to us? Like the Laodiceans, we've had things very easy. Sure, we've all had our problems, but, as a society, we've been prosperous, protected ... indulgent and indulged. In so many ways, here in the UK, we've been the envy of the world – which, of course, is one of the reasons we're encountering some of the problems we are today. But, both as a society and as individuals, we've lost our commitment to God. Worse, we've reshaped the gospel so that it aligns with what we want ... not realising just how foul, in God's eyes, we've become.

Because the Laodiceans, by their attitudes and behaviours, had lost all connection with truth, the Amen, whose word, as we've just heard, cannot be disputed or denied, says He is going to spit them out. This is judgment, and it should fill them – and us – with terror. Yet even at this late stage, Christ reaches out to them, calling to them to repent ... giving them one last chance.

Buy from me 'gold refined in fire'. What does that mean, I wonder? Throughout history, gold has been seen as the most precious of metals. It's valuable ... men have literally killed for it! But when it's first taken out of the ground, in its raw state, gold is mixed with all sorts of things ... it's impure, and at that point it isn't really that valuable. Of course, it does have worth, but to become of real value, it has to be refined. And that means it has to be put through the fire, because it's only when it's melted that the impurities come to the surface and can be taken out.

So gold in its raw state isn't worth very much, and Christ tells the Laodiceans to buy from Him gold that has been refined by fire. We've had the threat of judgment, but this is a word of real encouragement, because He's saying to them, 'you're in a pretty useless state at the moment, but the nuggets are still there. You do have worth, because once, before you became corrupted by the world and its luxury, you had faith – now you've got to recover that and to grow. To be saved, you've got to put yourselves in my hands, become obedient, and rediscover your faith.'

When we truly follow Christ, we very often encounter hardship, rejection, and even persecution. Philadelphia had been through that fire, and so, in varying degrees, had all the other five churches. It's the faithfulness in testing that reveals and purifies the metal – that gives us the faith Christ wants us to have and that He can use, because when we're refined, His Spirit can flow through us without any kind of block or hindrance. That's the mark and true value of a believer. And Christ says to the Laodiceans, you've gone astray and you're in a pretty raw state, but this can still be yours. It's not too late, if you'll only repent and come back to me.

So I don't think it's a mistake, or just coincidence, that this section of Revelation ends with the letter to the Church in Laodicea. It's a message of hope to those who've failed, fallen short, or gone astray, holding out the possibility of restoration. 'I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me' (v.20).

I'm sure you're all familiar with the Holman Hunt picture, The Light of the World. It was painted in direct response to this verse and, again, I'm sure you'll all know there's no handle on the outside of the door, so that it can be opened only from within. Christ is saying to the lukewarm and useless believers in this fallen Church, 'it's not too late. You can still repent, and to the one who does, and who overcomes, 'I will give the right to sit with me on my throne...' v.21

This is, surely, exactly the right note on which to end the letters to the 7 churches. We've heard about churches who struggled with immorality and heresy, and needed encouragement to get it right. We've heard about churches that have already faced, or are about to face, persecution We've heard about Philadelphia, which seems valiantly to have stood against all the odds! But Laodicea is a failed church ... and there's a reason it's included, here at the end. We can all maybe, in varying degrees, identify with the Laodiceans – and the established Church most certainly can. V.19, to all believers, Christ says, 'Those whom I love, I rebuke'. So to the Laodiceans, He says, 'I still love you ... you can still repent, and I'll help. Only seek me, and I won't let you go.'

What a note on which to end the 7 letters. What an encouragement! The Church in the UK has lost its way big-time, and it's most assuredly under judgement, but Christ still holds out the offer of repentance and, for those who respond, the promise of life. He stands at the door of this nation and knocks. So this is our call, to hold fast to the gospel and be faithful, whatever the future may hold. And this is the call to the Church, 'Return to the Lord in obedience and repent'. And to all who respond, Christ promises His help and protection, and the right to sit with Him on His throne.

1. What is 'lukewarm' faith, and how do we distinguish it from sin? Are there areas where we know we, as individuals, have become lukewarm or complacent? If so, what should we do?
2. Is apostasy a result of the Church having become complacent and simply having lost its way – or are we witnessing a deliberate spiritual challenge to God?
3. Can the established Church be restored, and, if so, how?

